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ABSTRACT

An examination of current textbooks for freshman English composition courses reveals that authors, editors, and publishers continue to perpetuate outmoded techniques which frustrate, rather than enhance, student writing ability. Most notable of these techniques is the unnecessary emphasis placed on complicated rules of grammar. Such an emphasis assumes a mastery of rhetorical terminology on the part of today's television-oriented student and promotes the fallacy that students will learn through the discussion of writing rather than through actual writing experience. Other questionable features of these texts include the utilization of meaningless study questions and fill-in-the-blank exercises; the overuse of jargon, such as the euphemism "prewriting" for "outlining"; the inclusion of filler, such as tips on how to buy paper; and the tendency of authors to indulge in philosophical ruminations on irrelevant topics. While some students will try to write and read in spite of these texts, others will be made to feel that writing is a massive undertaking for specialists. Such discouragement may lead some students to abandon English studies, writing, and perhaps even college. Texts should be developed which approach writing as though it existed outside the classroom by, for example, asking students to write about events in their lives, providing realistic writing models, and de-emphasizing grammar rules. (JP)

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to
Freshman Composition Texts

by

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Things seem to be looking up for the textbook companies. I say this because the flow of examination copies into the mail room at school has once again increased. In the late Sixties-early Seventies there was a flood of texts coming in, a high tide of readers and anthologies, handbooks and can't-miss composition texts. They littered the area like horseshoe crabs after a storm, and they came in faster than I could get rid of them.

Only one salesman asked for his company's book back when I told him this. "They cost money," he said. He must've been right, because they gradually disappeared, along with the cheap gallon of gasoline, and by the time of the Second Energy Crisis one could go for weeks on end without finding a text for adoption plopped into one's mailbox. Now the flow has increased again, wave after wave of traditional- and spiral-bound texts, but I can't figure out why. They are the same on the inside, unchanged after all this time, and they still don't work. I blame this on the teachers who write them and on the editors and publishers who encourage them.

All the freshman composition books seem to be written for teachers rather than students. They do their best to uphold tradition, stressing complicated rules of grammar and the time-

warm "modes" of rhetoric. They offer exercises which I can't do after fourteen years of teaching: "When who, whom, which, and that begin a dependent clause (a clause that does not make complete sense by itself), they agree in number with the closest antecedent (the word to which one of these pronouns refers). If you have any difficulty, just cover up the pronoun and repeat the closest antecedent along with the verb in the dependent clause." They insist on dividing themselves into sections titled "Process Analysis" or "Using Analogy as an Expository Device." These sections are usually ended with a friendly directive such as, "Now write your own five hundred word Process Analysis"; or "Now that you've read Jacob Bronowski's definition of science, write a paper in which you show a grasp of a major discipline, defining it with original analogies. Avoid trite phrases." The authors need not write "if you have any difficulty..."

Did any of us ever learn to write this way? No one outside the English classroom mentions the "process analysis essay," and I was never asked to write "an essay developed through definition." We probably learned to write (and read) by writing and reading -- a point John Holt reminded us of over a decade ago -- not by discussing writing and reading. The thrust of the texts is not in this direction. Rather, they are packed with Discussion Questions, Further Reading, Vocabulary Words (without definitions), Fill-in-the-blank Grammatical Exercises (with answers), Meanings and Values, Expository Techniques ("In what respects is [Woody] Allen's

humorous style a matter of syntax?"), Suggestions for Writing... Sometimes these sections take up more pages than the example they discuss.

Perhaps the approach was originally thought of as pulling students up to the teacher's serious and academic level, and perhaps it once worked. I doubt it, though. Everyone I knew in high school, college, and graduate school avoided Discussion Questions and Further Reading. Never once did I hear anyone say, "Hey, let's discuss these Questions!" One recent text asks "Is this paper free of contradictions and the pronouns you and your?" That should stimulate some discussion in the cafeteria.

Roger Garrison pointed out the foolishness of this approach when he noted that such books always include the question, "Why did the author use irony in the third paragraph?" But the trend is toward more of it, not less. Bindseil and Dickey's EFFECTIVE WRITING (1978) offers students a Rationale at the start of each of twenty Study Units, along with a list of Objectives and a Preassessment. Before they even begin the chapter the students -- TV-oriented and far from habitual readers -- must contend with three subdivisions which, though intended to help, only set up more barriers between them and the act of writing. There is, of course, a Postassessment section as well.

Teachers-writers are also determined that today's students will respond to grammatical terminology. Again the fallacy of tradition seems to be a work here -- we were drilled in grammar, so that must be what English is; therefore,

let's have more of the same. Look at these statements:

> Another way to subordinate is to place an idea that you want to de-emphasize in a relative pronoun clause.
>
> Identify the structures by numbering each of the cumulative sentences below (Robins, THE WRITER'S PRACTICAL RHETORIC, 1980).

Most of today's freshmen (50%-60%) need at least one semester of remedial English before they can approach a college-credit course. Even then they will have trouble with such explanations. Here's another:

> Combine each group of sentence components in at least two ways and explain your purpose (Robins).

This sounds like Garrison's example of irony. The real purpose is probably to finish it off and hope for a passing grade.

The justification for such heavy reliance on terminology seems to be that students should know it by the time they get to college, and if they don't let them take remedial courses til they do. The assumption is that a mastery of technical terms is equal to a mastery of writing. This is the TMI Syndrome. At Three Mile Island in March, 1979, technicians and company officials believed that mastery of terms was mastery of their subject. Thus if they could impress the media with enough data on rems, millirems, and nuclear "incidents" they would demonstrate their control of the situation. Of course, the use of such terms had no effect on the reality of the situation. We must ask again whether we affect a situation by talking

about it or by doing something about it. And what should we do?

Holt has pointed out that the way most literate people check their writing for accuracy is to try it two or three different ways and pick the one that looks or sounds right. They don't play back in their heads rules for every occasion. While our students often do not have the needed experience to do this, they do have twelve years of frustration with the traditional approach to grammatical rules. They might be told there is another way, which is the one used outside the artificial classroom situation which we have set up for them. Why not let them begin to get the experience with language which they need, by encouraging them to write without memorizing any more rules than we have.

But once jargon is released it is very difficult to contain. Its half-life is not as long as that of uranium, text books changing format in cycles of eight or ten years, but its effects can be devastating. Take the current favorite, "prewriting," Robins gives it twenty pages, McCrimmon (WRITING WITH A PURPOSE, 1980) gives it ninety. It is, of course, not what it says. It means "outlining." But now that we have a scientific-sounding term for it we can pretend that everything is under control, in a laboratory where answers will always be exact and problems will be solved by further experiments on our subjects. Since Robins begins his Prewriting section on page 36, we may presume that what preceeds it is pre-Prewriting. This opens up whole new areas for authors, such as sharpening

pencils, how to sit in a chair, and how to buy paper. ("How to Have Ideas" has already been dredged up and treated.)

The term is a euphemism. It gives a formal and technical sound to something which is actually easy to understand. But it is important to some authors and teachers because it makes them the authority through whom writing becomes accessible. "Prewriting" is one more barrier the student must overcome before approaching the required job of writing. It is a substitute for directly confronting the hard work of writing. And it is misleading because when the student jots down ideas in a thesis or an outline s/he is obviously writing -- not formally, but importantly.

In addition, authors enjoy a good philosophical rumination now and again. "What Is Writing?" is a favorite, along with "Sorting and Thinking" and "Wit." McCrimmon's Prewriting section includes "Your View of the Writing Situation" and "Your View of Your Purpose." Do students with little or no formal writing experience have a view of the writing situation? The latter section includes a "technical" definition of "purpose," but nothing so rude or direct as the fact that the student wants a passing grade out of the course, and that this may be his main purpose; or that he may actually want to learn to write if he could just get on with it. Smith and Liedlich's RHETORIC FOR TODAY (1980) takes a detour with twenty-five pages on inductive and deductive reasoning, and, in all, "over 50 pages concentrate on argumentation and transferring logical principles to expository writing" (publisher's words). Thus what is often the subject of an entire course is mapped in, and the student has one

more obstacle to confront before writing, or prewriting. Those fifty pages include Common Inductive Fallacies, The True Conclusion and the Probable Conclusion, Begging the Question, Evading the Issue, The Loaded Question, The Syllogism, Appealing to the Emotions, and Emotive Language. Students have to learn a whole new vocabulary here, and once again are impressed that they cannot write without command of a specialized vocabulary.

Note, too, that those fifty pages concentrate on fallacies which the student should not use. This is common. EFFECTIVE WRITING gives us "Trite and Wordy Sentences," fifteen pages which cover "Triteness," "More Trite Phrases," and "Still More Trite Phrases." These include long lists of "trite words and phrases that you should try to avoid," and exercises in which the student has to "underline any trite expressions." Lest the student grow tired of this, she is told "Before doing another exercise, you need to look at one more list." Why does the student need to do this? If studying what not to do is so helpful, perhaps comp books should contain only sentence fragments, redundant headings, and poorly written essays. Then, after the student memorizes, these, s/he will know, by deductive reasoning, that anything left over must be good writing.

A typical text combining many of the faults so far covered is BARNET & STUBB'S PRACTICAL GUIDE TO WRITING (1980). This was proudly sent to me by its publishers, and contains a note to me ("Dear Professor...") along with many "written in" annotations calling my attention to the virtues of this edition.

These include "an introduction to the entire process of writing -- from getting ideas to revising sentences," "interesting examples," "a remarkably readable and stimulating chapter on The Research Paper," and a "lively introduction to the process of revising" which includes "Instant Prose (Zonkers)." Many of use will be stimulated to find that there is so much excitement in revision. But once past the hype we find the same old contents and format. The terminology is difficult. Under Definition we have Definition by Origin, Definition by Synonym, and Stipulative Definition. The vocabulary is often sophisticated (which is not necessarily the same as good). "Let's look briefly at the first pages of Thoreau's WALDEN, to see how wit (especially intelligent use of understatement, overstatement, metaphor, and allusion) can challenge the reader while still engaging the reader's sympathies." We then look at WALDEN, Thoreau says:

> I should not obtrude my affairs so much on the notice of my readers if very particular inquiries had not been made by my townsmen concerning my mode of life, which some would call impertinent, though they do not appear to me at all impertinent, but, considering the circumstances, very natural and pertinent.

While I enjoy Thoreau myself, I stopped assigning his writing ten years ago. How many of today's college graduates would feel comfortable with the quotations above? I suspect almost none of our freshmen are.

The authors have a good deal of advice on what the student should not do. Avoiding Sarcasm and Avoiding Fallacies are two sections, and the student is told "distrust your first draft" (p. 327). There is, of course, the section on The Research Paper, often included in these books but again a separate discipline for which entering freshmen are not ready. There are plenty of polished essays by professional writers, unlike anything the student will be asked to write, and smooth enough to make most students feel that their writing is, by comparison, hopeless. There is one essay evidently by a student, called "How to Grow an Avocado." There are the inevitable questions following the essays. After E. B. White's "Education" the freshman is asked "What are some of the notable features of the essay's style? Cite a passage or two illustrating each" (p. 77). And there is filler. We are told at the outset that "writing is a physical act. It requires materials and energy." "Our first suggestion is this," say the authors: "buy a notebook that you can carry with you." Further helpful advice is, "Let's assume you either have an outline or you don't" (p.5). And, yes, there is even advice on how to buy paper (p. 539). All of this adds up to 642 pages of small print and intimidating text. The student is always kept on the defensive, made to feel that writing is a massive undertaking for specialists (and researchers), and (rightly) that it will take years just to figure this book out, let alone become a competent writer. Why are there so many of these books?

Editors want them.

Five years ago an editor at Holt, Rinehart & Winston told me that it was unlikely that a small text such as ELEMENTS OF STYLE would ever be published again. It was too small, and publishers just couldn't charge enough. (ELEMENTS OF STYLE is now $1.95 and still selling.)

While it is true that we all have to eat, it is also true that books now on the market seem to indicate that nothing compact is worthwhile. The page after page of blank space that bloats workbooks and remedial texts has spilled over to composition texts as well. We now have not only filler written by the authors, but filler not written by them. "Write thesis here" appears at the top of the page, and the rest is a series of widely spaced lines. The next page is the same. Later come other exercises: "Define these words" (each word followed by three blank lines); "Write a fragment that results from a missing verb;" "Latin Roots," "Greek Roots... write sentences using these words on the lines provided." Presumably students are smart enough to learn Latin and Greek along with English, but not smart enough to know where to find paper to write things down. Or else they're being sold blank paper at a high price.

It is my impression that editors in general have had no teaching experience. Their books run in cycles, imitating each other rather than fulfilling customer's needs. Their insistence on Discussion Questions, Further Reading, and so on, could be made only by those who have never tried to use them. That they do insist on such "apparatus" has been

confirmed by several colleagues in English, French, and Sociology who have proposed textbooks to interested editors who continually asked them for more traditional organization and more "student activities." The editors persisted until they dropped the project rather than turn out a text they didn't want for their own students and which, in fact, would not have been theirs. The editors know what is right in a text by looking at other texts of other editors. To be different would be taking a chance and perhaps even risking a job. And supporting material ye shall always have with you.

If such an opinion seems too strong, allow me to share with you the old 8-20 rule, which an editor at Scott Foresman recently informed me of. "If you want to write a short rhetoric, say, you focus on the best-selling short rhetoric and make a book that is 80 percent the same (the reason the book sells best is that is covers what people want to teach in pretty much the order in which they want to teach it) and 20 percent better (to give people a reason to switch)." The reasoning here is incredible -- the bigger the better -- stick with tradition -- whatever is is (basically) right. One would hope to find some commitment in the textbook world to ideals, or even to education, whether it came before or after profits. But the popularity approach works, or at least is worshipped, in TV and advertising and is justified by the same thinking -- it must be good if they buy it. Textbooks are approached with the same cynicism as "Laverne and Shirley." Perhaps this is to be expected: ITT

owns Bobbs-Merrill, Harper and Row owns Crowell and now Lippincott, D. C. Heath is "A Raytheon Company" (one suspects they have something to do with leisure suits); and CBS owns Winston Press. Everything's homogenized.

Still, why not some texts for students, approaching writing as though it existed outside the classroom and publishing house, and was not dependent on a specialized vocabulary? I have never seen some of these terms outside freshmen texts. Nor will our students. They do know jargon when they see it; they are not naive. So some of them will fight their way through, learning just enough to please the teacher. Some will try to write and read in spite of the books we're giving them. Others will get discouraged and turn off even further to English class, writing, and perhaps to college.

If writing were de-mystified, though, it would be easier for students to learn some of it on their own.* If they were asked to describe an event which affected their

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* The idea of learning on one's own while in college is still a startling one to many teachers and students. Garrison explains simply how many people learn to write: "by self-instruction, with the guidance and help of an editor." The teacher is the editor, and s/he works with what is already there.

lives they would be more likely to give a lifelike response than when asked to write a Cause and Effect theme or to deal with a paper on Casual Relations. If we asked them to outline their main thoughts on their topic, instead of making them read twenty pages on Prewriting, they could go directly to work. If we acknowledge that they have often had as much or more experience at living as we have, we could dispense with the Research Section and let them write about life. And why not a book just for first semester comp, without sections on Argumentation, How To Use the Library, and How to Footnote? This would acknowledge that the first term's writing is important.

For twelve years I've been using copies of papers written by students, and these are my text. I hand out one or two of these for each assignment and the class sees a realistic (and competent) example of what I want from it. Regarding terminology and rules, the single most important rule of grammar is that is a sentence is a complete thought (or, that it has a subject and a verb. Some students have memorized this but don't usually know that is means that the sentence is <u>about</u> something and tells what the thing <u>does</u>: Joe thinks). There are other rules, too, but if the students learn that , ; : . are just a system of pauses they won't need many other rules. And they can learn what they need while writing if the first couple of grades aren't

important and they're allowed to make mistakes and get started. When they begin to see progress write away -- even if they're only imitating the themes I've given them -- they'll start to be as enthusiastic about writing as we once were.

Until authors and editors stop fishing for the right variation of the wrong approach, I'll go on using my handouts. But what we all have to decide is whether we want to make the job of writing easier than we do now or harder than it has to be.

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